

An Introduction to the Bernese Mountain Dog





THE BERNESE MOUNTAIN DOG

Bernese Mountain Dogs have a long background as farmers' companions and working dogs in their Swiss homeland. Handsome and dignified in appearance, their soft, medium length shining black coat is set off by characteristic markings of a white blaze and muzzle, chest, feet, and tail tip and rich reddish-brown "eyebrows", cheeks, and bands between white and black on the legs. The thick coat is virtually weather resistant, and the dogs are comfortable outdoors no matter how cold the weather. They are strong, active, and sturdy, and range in size between 22-1/2 and 27-1/2 inches in shoulder height and usually between about 80 and 110 pounds in weight. The males are distinctly more massive in size and appearance than the females.

The long heritage of the Bernese as farmers' companions and co-workers is reflected in their good dispositions, devotion to their people, and ability to learn. Human companionship is very important to them, and they are not pack or kennel dogs.

A BRIEF HISTORY

As is true of most modern breeds of dogs that developed as farmer's helpers, the distant origins of the Bernese Mountain Dog are not well documented. Dog remains are known from Swiss archaeological sites dating back to about 3000 B.C., but how much these old native dogs contributed to the Bernese is not known. It is known that when the Romans invaded Helvetia (now Switzerland) around 2000 years ago, they brought along mastiff-type dogs to guard and drive the herds that accompanied the army. Skeletal remains from Roman sites in Switzerland show a dog having size and general structure like the Bernese. Perhaps the native dogs were crossed with the mastiff-type dogs, but we can do little more than speculate on this question. We do know that the Swiss agronomists developed several distinct breeds as farm dogs, and the Bernese was one of them. Old paintings dating from the latter part of the 18th and early 19th centuries show that the Bernese was distinctly different from the others by that time.

Around the end of the 19th century, when many "foreign" breeds were being imported into Switzerland, several Swiss dog fanciers saw that it was a mistake to ignore the many good qualities of the old native breeds. One eminent fancier, Professor Albert Heim, a respected geologist as well as an expert on dogs, was a leader in the movement to find and preserve the Swiss breeds. Heim, Franz Schertenleib, and a few other dedicated fanciers located some examples of the breed we know as Bernese in the Duerrbach region, in the southern part of the canton of Bern. At that time the breed had not set names--"farm dogs", "butchers' dogs", "cheesery dogs", "four eyes" (for the two spots over the eyes), "yellow cheeks", were all names applied to the Bernese. The breed was first officially called "Duerrbaechler", after the region where most were found, but by 1908 the name Berner Sennenhund was chosen: "Berner" for the canton where the dogs were used most, and "Sennenhund" meaning, roughly, dog of the herdsman. The Swiss Breed Club was established in 1907. The breed progressed steadily in Switzerland, and before too long this attractive, useful breed found fanciers in other countries.

THE BERNESE MOUNTAIN DOG IN AMERICA

The first Bernese Mountain Dogs that we know to have been brought into the United States were a pair imported by the farmer Isaac Schiess of Kansas in 1926. The importer wanted to register the pair with the American Kennel Club but was unsuccessful in his attempt. Ten years later, Glen Shadow of Ruston, Louisiana, a renowned fancier, imported another pair, Fridy v. Haslenbach and Quell v. Tiergarten. The American Kennel Club officially recognized the breed in 1937, and Fridy and Quell were the first Bernese registered by that Club.

In using the name Bernese Mountain Dog for the breed, the American Club followed the English who, for some reason, objected to the word Sennenhund (surely no more difficult a name than Rottweiler, Bouvier des Flandres, or Komondorok!). The adopted name is rather arbitrary and certainly is not a close translation of the Swiss name. But Bernese Mountain Dog they became and so remain.

The breed increased only slightly in numbers in the United States before 1941, at which time World War II interrupted further breeding and importing. After 1945, importing began again and registrations continued, although not heavily. Then, in 1968, the breed got a boost when the few breeders and owners were united in the Bernese Mountain Dog Club of America.

The Club was founded by a handful of fanciers on the West Coast. It grew slowly at first, having 33 members in 1968 and not growing to over 100

members until 1971. Now, with a membership of approximately 400, the Club is well established and active in protecting and promoting the best interests of the breed. The Club held its first sanctioned match in 1973, and by 1975 was granted "licensed" status by the American Kennel Club, allowing it to hold its own specialty shows. The Club produces a monthly newsletter and sponsors educational and other activities devoted to the breed. It serves to unite fanciers in their common efforts, provides information for people interested in learning more about the breed, and encourages formation of local groups devoted to the Bernese.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BERNESE MOUNTAIN DOG

The most obvious feature of any dog is, of course, its outward appearance. The Bernese is striking for its beautiful coloration of black, white, and rich reddish-brown, its gleaming coat, and its distinguished bearing. It is a heavy dog, with strong, sturdy legs, but is also active, a combination suiting it for the purposes of droving and draft work. The medium long, soft coat provides excellent protection against the weather. The dogs are perfectly natural in appearance, with no docking or ear cutting. Combing and brushing is all that is needed to maintain the coat, which requires no trimming or stripping. Daily care of the coat keeps the dog in tip-top condition.

Appearance is important in a companion dog, but beauty is empty unless associated with excellence of character. Here too the Bernese is striking. Its gentle, quiet nature wins fast friends. It is devoted to its people and an excellent companion. It is readily trainable, as would be expected of working farm dogs. Bernese have done well in formalized obedience work and show a real aptitude for tracking work, an ability that has been used in training them for avalanche work. They are good watch dogs, but not aggressive guards. Children and Bernese mix readily, as long as the children are taught to treat them with respect and kindness.

There are many good reasons for wanting to share your life with a Bernese Mountain Dog. Still, it should not be thought that these are dogs for everyone. Their large size must be considered. They require exercise in keeping with their strength and activity. They are not hard headed but have sensitive natures that must be treated with patience and kindness. They are relatively slow maturing dogs, with an active, sometimes boisterous puppyhood. The Swiss farmers saying about the breed, "Three years a young dog, three years a good dog, three years an old dog", is very appropriate.

YOUR BERNESE MOUNTAIN DOG

After having looked into the background and characteristics of the breed, it is good to see some dogs "in person". The Bernese Mountain Dog Club of America can help you by telling you where dogs may be seen in your area. Once the breed has stolen your heart, and the decision has been made that the Bernese is the breed for you, contact should be made with reliable breeders. Here too the Club can help by providing names of breeders.

It is ideal to visit the breeder, see the total litter, and meet the puppies' sire and dam. This ideal cannot always be met, due to the long distances sometimes involved in finding examples of the breed. However, try to establish good relations with the breeder by telephone, if not in person, and a mutually satisfactory arrangement for purchase of a puppy can be found. The breeder will be able to provide information on care and feeding, early training, and will provide also the necessary papers on health care and inoculations. You will find that sharing your experiences with a Bernese with other fanciers of the breed will be both fun and informative. The Bernese Mountain Dog Club can provide you with these contacts as well as with educational material on all aspects of the breed.

THE STANDARD

All breeds of dogs have a standard of perfection against which dogs are measured in dog shows. The standard for the Bernese Mountain Dog, adopted by the American Kennel Club in August, 1980, gives you a capsule statement on what should be found in the breed.

General Appearance

A sturdy, balanced, large, strong-boned dog. Intelligent and having an appearance of strength and agility suiting it to draft and droving work in mountainous regions. Dogs appear masculine, while bitches are distinctly feminine.

Head

Skull - Flat and broad with a slight furrow and a well-defined, but not exaggerated stop. Muzzle - strong and straight. Dry mouthed. Teeth - strong, scissors bite; complete dentition. Serious fault; overshot or undershot bite. Ears - medium sized, triangular in shape, gently rounded at the tip, hanging close to the head when in repose, brought forward and raised at the base when alert. Eyes - dark brown, slightly oval in shape with close-fitting eyelids; expression intelligent, animated and gentle. Serious faults - inverted or everted eyelids. Disqualification - Blue eye.

Neck and Body

Neck - Strong and muscular and of medium length. Back - broad and firm. Topline level from withers to croup. Chest - deep and capacious with well-sprung ribs and brisket reaching at least to the elbows. Body - nearly square with overall body length measuring slightly greater than height at the withers. Loin - strong. Croup - broad and smoothly rounded to tail insertion.

Forequarters

Shoulders - moderately laid back, flat-lying, well muscled, never loose. Forelegs - straight and strong with the elbows well under the shoulders. Pasterns slightly sloping without weakness. Feet round and compact with well-arched toes. Dewclaws may be removed from front legs.

Hindquarters

Thighs - Broad, strong and muscular. Stifles - moderately bent, tapering smoothly into hocks. Hocks - well let down and straight as viewed from the rear. Dewclaws should be removed from rear legs.

Tail

Bushy. Bone reaching to the hock joint or below. When in repose, tail should be carried low, upward swirl permissible when alert. May be carried gaily, but may never curl or be carried over the back. Fault - kink in tail.

Coat

Thick, moderately long, slightly wavy or straight, with a bright natural sheen.

Color and Markings

Tri-color - Jet black brown color with rich rust and clear white markings. Nose always black.

Markings (symmetry desired) - Rust: over each eye; on cheeks, preferably reaching at least to the corner of the mouth; on each side of chest; on all four legs; under tail. White: blaze and muzzle-band; chest marking, typically forming an inverted cross; feet; tip of tail.

Faults - Markings other than as described to be faulted in direct relationship to the extent of the deviation.

Serious Faults - White legs; white collars.

Disqualifications - Any ground color other than black.

Gait

Natural working gait is a slow trot, but capable of speed and agility in keeping with use in draft and driving work. Good reach in front. Powerful drive from the rear transmitted through a level back. No wasted action. Front and hind legs on each side follow through in the same plane. At increased speed, legs tend to converge toward the center line.

Height

Dogs: 24-1/2" to 27-1/2" at the withers.

Bitches: 22-1/2" to 25-1/2" at the withers.

Temperament

Self-confident, alert and good natured. Never sharp or shy.

A dog which will not stand for examination shall be dismissed from the ring.

Disqualifications

Blue eye color. Any ground color other than black.



FURTHER READING ON BERNESE MOUNTAIN DOGS

Periodicals

Newsletter, Bernese Mountain Dog Club of America

- monthly, available to Club members or by subscription

Purebred Dogs, American Kennel Gazette

American Kennel Club, 51 Madison Ave., New York 10010

- official publication of the AKC, with show schedules, titles awarded, and informative columns, including one on the Bernese.

Books

The Complete Dog Book, 16th Ed., American Kennel Club, 1979.

Howell Book House

- photographs and standards of all AKC recognized breeds

Die Schweizer Hunderassen, by Hans Räber, 1971. A. Müller Verlag, Zürich

- well illustrated book in German on all Swiss breeds, with excellent sections on Bernese

The Bernese Mountain Dog, by Diana Cochran, 1981. Feoilinn

-available from Diane Peterson...109 Holywood Ave., Somerset,N.J. 18873

Other

Bernese Mountain Dog Club of America, Anniversary Book and yearly Supplements

- photos, pedigrees, and background information on our breed, 1973-present

Bernese Mountain Dog Club of America, Puppy Packet

- tips on starting out right with your Bernese